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What Are "The Public Lands"?

Bureau of Land Management • U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

I know about national forests and national parks, things like that, but then I hear about "the public lands." What are those?

Of course, any land owned by local, State, or Federal Government is public land—national forests, national parks, State forests, even the neutral zone in the middle of a city's boulevard. But when we speak of the public lands, we mean chiefly that part of the original public lands of the United States still under Federal ownership which has not been set aside for uses such as national forests and parks. Larger than all other Federal lands combined, they cover some 452.6 million acres—about one-fifth the land area of the United States.

Where are these lands located?

Mostly in 11 Western States and Alaska, with small acreages in the Midwest and Southwest. About 175 million acres are in the West and 278 million acres in Alaska. The following table gives the breakdown by States as of June 30, 1969:

State	*Public land acreage*
Alabama	363
Alaska	277,314,772
Arizona	12,995,613
Arkansas	1,127
California	15,592,313
Colorado	8,465,124
Florida	367
Idaho	12,113,149
Kansas	954
Louisiana	2,023
Michigan	549
Minnesota	43,923
Mississippi	1,137
Montana	8,162,530
Nebraska	7,884
Nevada	48,231,204
New Mexico	13,185,219
North Dakota	74,835
Oklahoma	7,525
Oregon	15,686,725
South Dakota	276,571
Utah	22,752,224
Washington	293,067
Wisconsin	91
Wyoming	17,459,934
Total	452,669,373

What kind of lands are they?

Those in the West range from the flat terrain of the low desert country to deep, multicolored canyons and towering buttes and mountains. The gamut of cover runs from cacti to sagebrush and pinon pine to majestic redwoods and Douglas fir of the Pacific Northwest. Together, they offer some of the most dramatically sweeping vistas of the untamed West. The lands of Alaska are mostly timber or tundra, but also include mountains and swamps, even desert areas.

Watersheds of the public lands are the source for a large portion of the West's water supply. Mostly arid or semiarid, very little acreage is suitable for farming; but they have great value for livestock grazing, mineral development, timber, wildlife, and outdoor recreation. They also include many areas of scientific value. Most lands are distant from population centers, and many are not accessible by all-weather roads.

Who is responsible for managing these lands?

The Bureau of Land Management, an agency of the Department of the Interior. This Bureau was formed in 1946 out of the General Land Office (which dates back to 1812) and the Grazing Service (formed in 1934).

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How have these lands been managed in the past?

Until the 1930's, they were not really managed. Most people looked upon these lands simply as acreage not yet settled by the growing population—a temporary "storehouse of land" which would soon be needed by settlers. Thus, administration was largely limited to surveying, processing of mining claims and land transfers by the General Land Office. In 1934, after it was generally recognized that little of the remaining lands were suitable for independent farm units, Congress set up the Grazing Service expressly to manage those lands which could produce forage for livestock. Range management continued as the main job after the Bureau of Land Management was formed, although some attention was given to other values.

How will these lands be managed in the future?

For many uses. This includes domestic livestock grazing, fish and game, industrial development, mineral production, outdoor recreation, and watershed protection. Under the Classification and Multiple-Use Act of 1964, BLM is helping to meet some of the modern-day recreation needs of America's rising population, for example. Access roads will be constructed and sanitation and protection facilities will be provided in many areas.

What does this management job involve?

Briefly, the Bureau's job includes:

1. Timber and forage management:
2. Watershed protection;
3. Public land leases and sales;
4. Custodianship and maintenance of basic public land records;
5. Mining and mineral leasing, including the Outer Continental Shelf;
6. Public land boundary surveys;
7. Preservation and improvement of wildlife habitat;
8. Development of facilities to serve the general public;
9. Preservation and restoration of natural beauty on the public lands;

What revenues are collected by BLM?

An average of more than $480 million a year during the past 10 years. One important source was oil leases and royalties on the Outer Continental Shelf, known as "offshore lands." Other major sources included mineral leases and permits, sales of timber and grazing leases. This is almost seven times the amount BLM spent during that period. The following table shows receipts and appropriations since 1959:

Year	Receipts	Obligations
1959	$136,720,871	$31,102,597
1960	371,067,867	35,505,099
1961	159,246,157	42,897,373
1962	173,517,502	43,329,735
1963	530,692,660	60,655,589
1964	199,051,586	62,056,629
1965	234,360,884	73,465,733
1966	433,749,012	88,415,350
1967	821,504,386	82,412,319
1968	1,158,886,091	89,158,743
1969	651,088,021	91,178,828
Total	4,869,885,037	700,177,995

Are public lands still being sold?

Yes; certain lands are transferred from Federal ownership each year under various laws. For instance, in 1969, nearly 274 tracts totaling 37,876 acres were sold at public auction. Since the United States became a a nation, more than 1 billion acres have been transferred for State grants, military land bounties, railroad grants, homesteads, and various other purposes.

Is it still possible to homestead?

Homesteading, for all intents and purposes, is a thing of the past. Though the law is still on the books, nearly all the land which could be farmed economically has already passed into private ownership. Most of the remaining land is too dry, rough, or otherwise unsuitable for cultivation.

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EASTERN STATES
7981 Eastern Ave., Silver Spring, Md. 20910. This office handles inquiries on States not listed above.

For other information on the Bureau of Land Management, please refer to:
What About Land in Alaska? (Information Bulletin No. 2), 0–792–665.
How To Buy Public Lands (Information Bulletin No. 4), 0–265–484.

Revised March 1971

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE : 1971—O-416-874

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
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